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ABSTRACT

Since the Montessori method was introduced in the United States, the original Montessori philosophy has evolved to incorporate many American adaptations. This paper explores how teachers in one Montessori school introduced new elements to the existing principles of Maria Montessori in their classrooms. The case study shows that these teachers have valid knowledge of the original Montessori philosophy, and that their cautiously implemented adaptations complied with the original principles of Montessori. (Contains 16 references.) (Author/HTH)

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# Classroom Adaptation: A Case Study of a Montessori School

Daungvan Bunnag

## Abstract

Since the Montessori method came to the United States, the original Montessori philosophy has evolved to incorporate many American adaptations. This paper explores how teachers in one Montessori school introduced new elements to the existing principles of Maria Montessori in their classrooms. The results of the study show that these teachers have valid knowledge of the original Montessori philosophy, and their cautiously implemented adaptations complied with the original principles of Montessori.

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## Aims

Maria Montessori was an Italian physician and an anthropologist. But perhaps she is most remembered for her contribution as an educator. At the turn of the 20th century, Dr. Montessori discovered a revolutionary way to direct young children's learning. Her method was efficient, effective, and nothing less than extraordinary, especially when compared with the stringent early education system of the time. With a seemingly passive teaching approach, the Montessori method produced an unusual level of productivity from a child. Fascinated with the earlier work of Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard and Edouard Seguin, Dr. Montessori made a breakthrough observation that "Impressions do not merely enter [the child's] mind; they form it. They incarnate themselves in him. The child creates his own 'mental muscles,' using from this what he finds in the world about him" (Montessori, 1967, pp. 25-26). In contrast to the teacher-centered approach dominating at the time, Dr. Montessori showed repeatedly that children could learn more effectively if adults provided them with a prepared environment where they would be enticed to exert their power. She insisted on following and observing the child, and she dismissed adults' aggressive intervention to introduce learning materials. Dr. Montessori also praised the benefits of the multi-age classrooms but discouraged the inclusion of fantasy play. Her method later received some criticism for its lack of music and art and its lack of concern for social interaction and creativity (Hainstock, 1978).

When Dr. Montessori published her work in 1909, her fame grew beyond her native country, and educators around the world began to adopt the method and apply it to young children in their countries. Having gained international acceptance, the Montessori method needed to be modified in order to adapt to the new hosts (Hainstock, 1978; Kramer, 1976). For instance, one of the primary goals of the American Montessori Society (AMS), founded in 1960, was "to establish the teaching of Montessori's insights in an American cultural setting" (Neubert, 1992, p. 66). Continuing into the present day, many aspects of the Montessori method are still being challenged to evolve to incorporate the expectations and values of today's children (Epstein, 1990; Loeffler, 1992).



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Many researchers have devoted their efforts to studying these modifications and adaptations of the Montessori method, especially in the United States. Examples of these adaptations include the expansion of the Montessori method into the public school system (Kahn, 1990; Buermann, 1992; Wang, 1992), special education programs (Hale, 1992; Lamorea & daCosta, 1996; Richardson, 1992; Pickering, 1992), programs for disadvantaged children (Lopez, 1992), and in-home education (Hainstock, 1978; Hoppert, 1980). These studies investigated the changes made to the original method of Dr. Montessori when it was applied to programs other than the conventional Montessori schools. Consequently, most of these studies concluded that program-level adaptations were appropriately integrated.

At the classroom level, Holmes foresaw in 1912 the adaptations of the American Montessori "depending on the characteristics of the children and teacher" (Kramer, 1976, p. 170). Epstein (1990) also stated that trained Montessori teachers are encouraged to modify and improve Montessori practice in their classrooms. From these statements, it would have been anticipated that numerous studies on classroom adaptations would follow. However, due to rapid growth in the various programs and extensions as in the examples above, much effort has been concentrated in the adaptations in these programs. Because the importance of the adaptations at the level of classroom had been recognized (Holmes, cited in Kramer, 1976; Epstein, 1990), but considerably less attention had been given to the teachers' influence in their Montessori classrooms, I sought to determine how Montessori-trained teachers choose to adapt the philosophy and introduce new elements into their classrooms.

To investigate the extent of adaptation in individual classrooms, a Montessori school was selected, and permission was granted for study. Classroom observation as well as teachers' interviews were conducted. This combinative approach was used to promote the dependability and accuracy of the representative Montessori classrooms. The data presented here were selected examples from each classroom and descriptions of the interaction between the teacher and the students, including some specific conversations recorded within the respective classrooms. The interpretation for each room was then woven into the supporting evidence interpreted from the interviews of the teachers. The resulting individual portraits are presented in this paper.

## Teacher I: "Sandy"

When I entered Sandy's Montessori classroom, the first thing that struck me was its decoration. Covering the walls were pictures of musicians. A large stereo and a considerable number of cassettes occupied one corner of the room. Classical music played in the background, and children were scattered all over the room. The room contained many child-sized tables and chairs. Some tables had math workbooks open on them, while some were occupied by students concentrating on an exercise. The classroom was organized neatly; many Montessori exercises were visible. There was an art corner, a reading corner, and a snack area. A main characteristic of the carpeted side of the room was a "time line," a blue oval boundary about the size of a standard living room rug with a yellow duck patterned in the middle. I was told that this time line would be used for group activities such as unit studies, calendar-time, show and tell, and story telling, during which students all sat in the middle of the oval. There were about 20 students in Sandy's classroom.

### Sandy's Montessori-Based Philosophy

Sandy was a qualified Montessori teacher. The quality that Sandy valued the most in a Montessori program was that children enjoy what they learn. One of the emphases of her Montessori method was to allow the child to be independent and enjoy his or her learning. Sandy said that the Montessori method developed the whole child as a person as well as allowing the children to learn and grow on their own while enjoying themselves. Sandy said that she does not teach but merely "directs" the students towards their proper development. She also believed that the Montessori materials were self-teaching and self-correcting, and that the children would learn on their own if she let them handle and solve their own problems.

Sandy believed that, using these materials, the children naturally would interact among themselves

when solving their problems. She believed that this method promoted their social interaction in addition to their problem-solving skills. In other words, the children learned to respect one another. The development of the children's social interaction was supported by my observation of the classroom. The children usually gathered into small groups to work on the materials of their choice. I observed two boys working together on the "Pink Tower" exercise:

> In the carpeted section of the classroom, George was working on the "Pink Tower" when Bill approached him and appeared to have made a suggestion. After a short negotiation, the two boys agreed and together walked towards one of the shelves. They helped each other to bring back pieces of the "Red Rock" exercise. They kept going back and forth, combining the two materials together with frequent discussions.

## Adaptations of the Original Method

Ever since she was an assistant, Sandy tried to design the curriculum in her classroom to accommodate two things: what the children would enjoy and what would be necessary for their development. For this purpose, when she became the head teacher, Sandy brought in additional materials such as music, unit studies, and academics to broaden her Montessori-based curriculum. Although these activities were not mentioned in the original method of Dr. Montessori, Sandy felt that their inclusion in her classroom was in the children's best interest. These activities were introduced as supplements to enhance the effectiveness of the method, not to contradict the existing philosophy.

*Music.* Sandy said that music was a part of her life, and as a musician, she felt it was vital that one respect and understand his/her instrument. Her personal love of music was adapted and transformed in the classroom. She mentioned that each Montessori classroom at the school had a "personality" of its own, and that the flavor of her classroom was music. "We always turn on the music as a background, so you know we can develop the children's aesthetic brain as well as cognitive." Sandy argued that this adaptation set the tone and initiated the joyful rhythm in her classroom; she felt very strongly about the positive effects music had in her classroom:

> I tend to play music in the background. I think it sets the tone. Either classical or Celtic, flute music or Peruvian flute music, ... easy listening ... something that would set the tone for the day. It might be seasonal. Right now we're doing Celtic music because of the time of the year, we're doing St. Patrick's day.

She also showed me the music workbooks and the picture books about music history she made for the whole class. In addition to music, Sandy also introduced some activities involving the fine arts. She mentioned that "I do a lot of seasonal works. In kindergarten right now, we are doing van Gogh. And we are just finishing the unit on Monet. It is fun." However, her emphasis in this area was significantly less than in music.

*Unit Studies.* Because she believed that the children should enjoy what they learn in class, Sandy tried to keep their options as open as possible. Similar to the music, Sandy brought extra curriculum such as themes or unit studies to her classroom because she believed that the students found them interesting and they introduced variety to her curriculum. Sandy mentioned that the difference between her program and non-Montessori programs was that she tried to keep the topics broad and general. These topics included seasons, holidays, and occupations. To keep up the children's interest and enthusiasm in class, there were many different units that she had incorporated into the daily routines. Here was one example:

> For today, we're doing spring. Looking for signs of spring ... I was going to jump rope....We are making spring baskets filled with eggs. We also talked about how different cultures celebrate different things [at different] times of year....We talked about Easter....We talked about respecting nature ... and respecting your family ... that's basically what I went over today ... if it's Spring, I can come up with a lot of different things.... Thursday we will dye eggs.

*Academics.* Another main element that Sandy had adapted for her classroom in addition to the unit studies was academic materials and workbooks. Although the Montessori materials play an important role in the curriculum of Sandy's classroom—they are self-correcting and the children could learn to interact

among one another—Sandy also believed that an academic-oriented adaptation was necessary. This component was combined with her focus on the children's enjoyment as well as their proper development. Sandy asked her children to work on academics on a regular basis. Even though she explained that it "doesn't have to be anything that is too demanding," the children's work in her class usually involved a math and language activity.

### Epilogue

The quality that Sandy valued most in a Montessori program was the importance of the children having fun while they learn. She believed that the enjoyable self-teaching and self-correcting Montessori materials properly developed all aspects of the children, such as social interaction and problem-solving skills. Because of the quality of these materials, Sandy saw her role not as a teacher but as a facilitator who merely oversaw the classroom. Believing in her understanding of the core of the Montessori philosophy, Sandy introduced new elements to broaden the scope of her classroom in an effort to keep things enjoyable for her children. Because she had background in various fields, Sandy tried to utilize these experiences to expand her curriculum. The music, art, and academics that she added to her classroom were examples of her effort to create the best learning atmosphere for her children. In all, Sandy trusted that the added elements helped to sustain the joy in her classroom and set the tone for a proper learning atmosphere while complementing the principles of the philosophy. Her introduction of these personal adaptations to her Montessori classroom bound all the things she loved to serve the single purpose of developing her children.

## Teacher II: "Tammy"

Tammy's classroom looked like any ordinary Montessori classroom. The room was divided in half—one half carpeted and one uncarpeted. There were not as many tables and chairs scattered around the room as in Sandy's classroom because Tammy emphasized the use of concrete exercises as opposed to workbooks. Instead of asking the children to complete a portion of the workbooks each day, Tammy used activities such the sandbox for writing, storybooks for reading, and word cards for vocabulary development. Students were not asked to work on the workbooks until they were 5 or 6 years old. The Montessori materials were stored neatly in their places. The materials were arranged on low shelves so that the children could have easy access to them. A big canvas stood in the middle of the uncarpeted portion of the room. A small sink was by the coatroom, and a little area for snack was nearby. There were about 20 students in this afternoon class.

### Tammy's Montessori-Based Philosophy

Tammy was a certified Montessori teacher. She modeled the curriculum in her classroom around Montessori methods. Her main philosophy focused on the concept of the children teaching themselves. In her classroom, Tammy was careful to let the children make their own decisions. Her job, as a teacher, was to follow them and guide them accordingly. Her emphasis in the classroom was the students' experience, not their success; the process, not the product. With these principles, Tammy believed that the children would, on their own, learn adult responsibilities such as problem solving and time management. Having the children make their own choices was Tammy's main teaching philosophy, and what she believed to be the core benefit of the Montessori program:

> The most important part is that this child leaves feeling good about himself because of the successes he's had or she's had—that she is able to or he is able to make choices and live with the choices that he makes.

Because she praised her students for making their own choices, it was understandable that Tammy discouraged interfering with them while they learned. Tammy said that she found "the other curriculum for preschools too much teacher directed" and that "everyone is doing everything at the same time." Tammy contrasted this approach with her Montessori philosophy that "the teaching is ... what the children do, it's not what [the teachers] do." She believed that her job was just to show them the materials, how to use the materials, and the qualities of the materials—what the children took from that was entirely up to them.

Allowing the children to learn on their own and valuing their decisions, Tammy concluded that "Montessori is not about the product, but the process." In addition, Tammy liked the multi-age classroom. For example, her kindergartners could help the 3-years-olds because they were familiar with the materials. At the same time, the experienced students learned to be leaders—helpful, gentle, tender, and understanding. This role built their confidence about their knowledge and their decisions. On the other hand, for the younger kids, the multi-age classroom provided a comforting atmosphere, almost like having "an older sibling there to help you ... it's like a family."

**Adaptations of the Original Method**

In addition to her Montessori-based teaching philosophy, Tammy also introduced some new concepts to her classroom. Examples of these elements were the introductions of unit studies, fantasy play, art, and music—elements that were not described in the original method of Dr. Montessori. The motivation for such additions was, like Sandy's, to improve the existing curriculum. Nonetheless, having valued the importance of the Montessori method and its underlying principles, Tammy adapted these ideas to utilize maximally the benefits of the original curriculum.

*Unit Studies.* The idea of unit studies was distinct from the philosophy of Montessori. However, Tammy adapted her unit study to blend into the Montessori curriculum. She stressed that "[her unit studies are] available for everyone to do, but [the students] don't all have to do it if they don't want to. It's an option." Although the concept was new to the curriculum of Montessori, the general principle remained that the children still had the freedom to choose. A scene from Tammy's unit study is illustrated below:

> Today's unit was "penguins." Tammy picked up a penguin book from the shelf and asked questions about the story in the book. The children raised their hands if they wanted to answer. Some examples of the questions were "Is penguin a mammal or a bird?" or "Is penguin a carnivore or an omnivore?" Most children were able to answer correctly. I felt that although Tammy repeated this book again, the children seemed to have a lot of fun with this activity.

*Art and Music.* Similar to the way she integrated the unit studies into the Montessori program, Tammy introduced concepts of art and music to her classroom. The children sang along with tapes and CDs. There was a unit on rhythm instruments. The art shelf contained mostly what she called "open art." Basically, there were just paper, scissors, glue, crayons, pencils, etc., for the children to use to create their own project of interest. Again, similar to the adaptation of the unit studies, the incorporation of the Montessori philosophy was clear. Tammy said that the focus was on the students' creativity, saying that "we're not going to come out with the same project" and that "everyone doesn't have to do it."

*Fantasy Play.* Tammy said that in a "strict" school, fantasy play would be strictly prohibited. However, in her classroom, Tammy allowed the children to play if they wanted to. She said it was important during Dr. Montessori's time that the children didn't "go off to Lalaland" because their survival depended on reality not fantasy. However, "it is not as strict now," because the children's survival no longer depends merely on reality. It was apparent that Tammy did not believe that her students should be prohibited from fantasy play.

*Kisses and Hugs.* Another example of Tammy's adaptation of the Montessori method was her attitude towards hugging and touching the children. According to the principles of Montessori, there was to be minimal touching between the teacher and the children. The school also took this stance: "they were very concerned about touching and hugging. Can't touch, can't hug." However, having been a day care teacher, Tammy insisted that it was okay to hug and touch, especially when the children had been away from their parents all day long. Simply, she felt comfortable doing it, and she was not about to agree to something that she did not see as appropriate.

**Epilogue**

Tammy's faith in Montessori lay in the children's power to learn by themselves. She encouraged her children to make their own decisions and accept the consequences. In her classroom, the emphasis was on the process of learning, not the final outcome. She saw herself as a facilitator who merely observed the

children and kept things running smoothly in the classroom. Tammy adapted several concepts based on her personal philosophy while realizing that some of her values overlapped those of Montessori's. Nonetheless, these ideas were introduced because the teacher believed that they would benefit her children. The unit studies, art, and music were brought in to expand the scope of the existing Montessori materials. The fantasy play and kisses/hugs represented Tammy's decision to eliminate certain features from the original philosophy. She did not view them as being inappropriate. In all, Tammy was a good teacher, who was committed to her children's healthy development. Her curriculum, whether Montessori based or personally adapted, was designed in the children's best interest.

## The Director: "Rebecca"

Although the director of the school had not yet gone through the Montessori training process, she had done extensive reading on Montessori materials to familiarize herself with the method. She pointed out some observations that could be considered discrepancies from the original guidelines of Dr. Montessori.

### Different Flavors

Rebecca acknowledged that, although the Montessori program was more standardized than others, it could only minimize the inevitable "human factors" not eliminate them. The six classrooms still had six different personalities. The "flavors" in these classrooms were mainly influenced by the character of each teacher. "Anytime you've got human beings, you're going to have some kinds of personalities." However, she said that this variety was actually beneficial to the children because they would not always be with a single person or in a single classroom in the future:

> We want [the differences in the classrooms] because the children are not always going to be with us. We want them to be able to adjust to different people, to understand that all kinds of adults can care about them, and be there for them and help them ... so I allow for the individual personalities in the classroom.

### Parent Education

In addition to the classrooms being different from one another, some adaptations of the orthodox Montessori methods were needed to accommodate the modern era. When Maria Montessori first introduced her revolutionary idea to early childhood education, her principal experiments were based upon the children in "The Children's House." These youngsters were mostly underprivileged children with mental disabilities. The power that parents exert today on society's educational system was not a factor in this earlier endeavor: Rebecca acknowledged this potential problem. Some parents complained that the atmosphere in the Montessori classrooms was too free and nonacademic. Rebecca went on to emphasize that she had to work with parents to make sure parents understood and kept an open mind towards these methods. Since she had been at the school, the director was very active in educating the Montessori parents about the concepts and principles of the Montessori method and the school.

## Discussion and Conclusions

This study was aimed at discovering how teachers in a Montessori school adapted their philosophy and introduced new elements to the existing principles of Maria Montessori. Different adaptations in the current Montessori classrooms were investigated to determine the factors that influence such adaptations. The data were analyzed and presented as portraits of each case to reflect the characteristics of the corresponding classrooms.

The discussion of this study is divided into two main sections: the concurrence and the adaptations of the teachers' practice to the original Montessori method. These elements were supported with specific evidence from the classrooms. The sources of influence that may contribute to such outcomes were also proposed.

### Concurrence

The findings suggested consistency in the teachers' understanding of the principles of Montessori. According to *The Absorbent Mind* (Montessori, 1973),

the child is capable of absorbing knowledge and has the power to teach himself. This belief was the basis of this revolutionary and effective curriculum; the other elements revolve around this message. At this school, although some aspects of the curriculum varied from one classroom to the next, the teachers appeared to understand the core concepts of the method. The children's freedom was the main emphasis in all classes. Both teachers explained that their philosophy focused on the concept of the children learning by themselves and choosing their own tasks. They wanted the children to enjoy what they did and acquire knowledge at their own pace as well as to accept the consequences. These teachers concentrated on following their children and allowing them to develop naturally using the Montessori materials. The self-teaching materials were highly valued and respected in both classrooms. Because the emphasis in the classroom was placed on the children, the teachers described themselves as facilitators rather than instructors; the focus was on the children's learning process, not the product. All three personnel interviewed shared the Montessori philosophy.

**Adaptations**

Although the basic principles of Montessori were retained, some adaptations were seen in the classrooms. Unlike the shared concepts above, these modifications were not always the same in all classrooms. These adaptations were not necessarily negative deviations, but rather an individualization by each teacher done in the children's best interest. The factors contributing to these adaptations could be divided into two subcategories: personal and external adaptations.

*Personal Adaptations.* One apparent source of the personal adaptations was the individual teacher's background. Focusing on this factor, one noticed that the experiences in the teachers' earlier careers significantly influenced practice in their classrooms. For example, prior to her introduction to Montessori, Sandy was involved in music as a singer. Music was a major part of her life. Hence, it was not surprising that music was the main theme in her classroom—most of the activities revolved around music. There would be music playing in the background, discussion of the seasonal music, and sessions on music history. As for Tammy's classroom, some characteristics of the classroom also reflected her experience as a day care teacher. Tammy was familiar with her role of comforting the children when they had been away from their parents all day. Being used to that role, she continued to cuddle the children even though the Montessori philosophy suggested that kissing and hugging the children should be kept to a minimum. These examples showed clearly the strong influences of the teachers' pre-Montessori background on practice in their classrooms.

Another source of the personal adaptations was the teachers' personal beliefs. For instance, Montessori proposed that any fantasy play should be prohibited because the children should focus on the real world. However, Tammy amended this philosophy because she believed that it no longer applied. Her point was made on the basis of the time period that the Montessori method was constructed: children's survival today no longer depends just on reality. Tammy therefore adapted the original philosophy and chose not to intervene when her children engaged in fantasy play. In addition, based on their personal beliefs, the teachers also introduced new elements to their teaching to broaden the original curriculum. Academic teaching observed in Sandy's classroom represented this aspect. Sandy asked her children to work on some paper-based academic work on a regular basis because she believed that this type of academic learning in the classroom was necessary. The added assignment contrasted with the original method of teaching academics through the Montessori's self-correcting materials. This adaptation further reflected Sandy's trust of her personal beliefs and judgment.

*External Adaptations.* Unlike the personal adaptations where changes were implemented independently by different teachers, external adaptations occurred from the environment outside the classrooms such as the community or the school policy. The prime examples were the unit studies. This academic adaptation was present in all the classrooms observed. The interviews suggested that these methods of teaching were incorporated from an external curriculum, probably the traditional system, but modified to fit the Montessori program. Sandy noted

that this adaptation helped broaden her curriculum. However, she still tried to keep the emphasis on the children's freedom, which meant that they did not have to participate in such activities if they did not want to. Tammy took a similar stance to make sure the topics of her unit studies were based on her students' interests.

It seems that the original source of unit studies was the community, namely the parents. The most apparent case was the academic emphasis in Tammy's classroom. The teacher explained positively that the emphasis on academics in her classroom was not at all her intention. She felt that this development came from the parents' influence because the program was located in a university town. They expected the school to possess a strong academic program. This example showed clearly the power exerted by the parents. Rebecca must have realized this substantial influence since she also supported the introduction of an education program to assist parents with the Montessori philosophy. The program was aimed to minimize confusion about the school's methods in order to avoid any unbeneficial and unnecessary adaptations.

In summary, this study examined specific classroom implementations of two teachers, comparing them with Dr. Montessori's original principles. It was found that some adaptations varied between classes and were personal adaptations resulting from differences among the teachers. Other adaptations occurred uniformly throughout the program and were defined as external adaptations. While the personal adaptations were significantly influenced by factors such as individual beliefs and background, the external adaptations were derived primarily from external sources, which affected the school as a whole, such as parents. Regardless of types and derivations, these adaptations were implemented with great respect for the original Montessori philosophy. Any changes that had been implemented had been intentionally modified to allow the children to have the absolute right to choose from their own interests and proceed at their own pace to fulfill all of their potential possibilities, which is the essence of the Montessori method.

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